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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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Cameroon: Biya's Political Challenges

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Summary

President Paul Biya, a southern Christian, must move quickly to create an image of firm and decisive leadership in order to avoid further disunity and challenges in the wake of the failed insurrection in early April by predominantly northern Muslim elements of the presidential guard. The 51-year-old Biya--from the Boulou tribe--faces a difficult task forging a new and workable political balance that can overcome differences among some 200 tribes and 24 language groups, northern Muslims and southern Christians, and English-speaking West and French-speaking East Cameroonians.

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This memorandum was prepared by West Africa Branch, Africa Division, Office of African and Latin American Analysis at the request of the Deputy Director of Central African Affairs at the State Department. It has been coordinated with the Director of Operations. Questions and comments are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Africa Division,

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In our judgment, Biya's fate will depend in large measure on his ability to assert control over Cameroon's Army, which was forced to abandon, at least temporarily, its traditional apolitical role to rescue the civilian regime. We believe that Army officers--particularly those from the south--now hold the balance of power and will be watching Biya's post-coup performance closely for signs of weakness or indecision. For their part, northern officers--particularly those that remained loyal--are likely to fear that they will be subject to political retribution. []

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We have no evidence of outside meddling in Cameroon. Although Libya has had almost no influence among the northern Muslim population, Qadhafi could see current tensions as an opportunity to curry favor among disgruntled northerners. []

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The historically close relationship between Paris and Yaounde may cool over the next several months if Cameroonian suspicions of alleged French complicity in the coup persist or if the Biya government formally indicts former President Ahidjo--a northerner Muslim now in exile in France--as a conspirator. Biya clearly is looking to the United States for advice and greater support, but probably recognizes that Washington cannot replace Paris as Cameroon's major benefactor. []

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Post-coup Challenges

Biya already has disbanded the presidential guard, reorganized remaining units of the Gendarmerie, arrested officers of suspect loyalty, and begun to reassign others in an effort to forestall future plotting. We believe, however, that Biya's standing in the military has been seriously damaged by the coup attempt and that he faces a difficult task reestablishing the principle of civilian control over the military. At the very least, senior officers who rallied to Biya now are free to offer political advice, and may well be in a position to veto policies with which they disagree. ☐

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In our judgment, Biya's handling of the trial and punishment of imprisoned plotters will determine the fate of his regime. We also believe it will serve as an early indicator of how much heed Biya feels he must pay to special ethnic or regional interests in the armed forces. Thus far Biya has attempted to appear strong without being vindictive, but we question whether he has the political influence needed to convince all factions to put aside sectarian interests in favor of national reconciliation. ☐

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We believe Biya may be particularly susceptible to those southerners in the military who argue that any leniency will be interpreted as weakness rather than magnanimity. Many southern officers chafed under 22 years of rule by Ahidjo and may now believe they have an opportunity to settle old scores as well as rapidly advance their own careers by purging senior northern officers--including those who remained loyal--from key command positions. ☐

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Biya also must calm and reassure Cameroon's diverse ethnic, regional, and religious groups that their interests will not suffer during the post-coup political uncertainty. Though Biya has played down any regional dimension to the coup attempt, we believe parochial loyalties and suspicions--never far from the political surface in Cameroon--will take on added significance. In particular, we believe Biya must pay particularly close attention to the following conditions:

--Northerners, who already feel that the Ahidjo-Biya rift over who should govern Cameroon has cost them too many of the perquisites they enjoyed under the former president, now are likely to fear that Biya will use the failed coup to tip the balance of power even more strongly in favor of the south.

--English-speaking West Cameroonians--about 20 percent of the population--have become increasingly restive over what they see as their second class status and the failure of the aging Anglophone leadership to better represent their interests.

--Many southern Cameroonians are now certain to argue that Biya has no choice but to take harsh action against his opponents and rely more heavily on fellow southerners. ☐

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Short-term Outlook

In our judgment, Biya's fate rests on his ability quickly to project an image of a firm, decisive, national leader capable of crafting a broadbased ethnic and regional coalition loyal to him. Although Biya is receiving professions of support from throughout Cameroon, we believe he must prove that he is a skilled and tough political infighter. Any delay, even if only weeks, will further undermine his political credibility and encourage speculation among Cameroonians that Biya's time in office is limited. []

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Biya most certainly will now concentrate on his political survival at the expense of earlier efforts to distinguish his presidency from Ahidjo's more authoritarian regime. We expect, for example, that Biya will tolerate less criticism from Cameroon's media. Furthermore, Biya is likely to shelve, at least temporarily, plans for allowing greater competition within the ranks of the ruling Cameroon National Union, and may look for support among old line politicians--many of whom he roundly criticized before the coup--in an effort to avoid further upsetting the already frayed political balance. []

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We believe that while Biya most certainly recognizes the dangers of being seen by Cameroonians as the political captive of southern interests, he may conclude that he has no choice but to fall back on his most solid base of support. In our judgment, temptations to pursue such a course will mount if he believes he has no chance to regain a following among skittish northerners or if his support among English-speaking Cameroonians proves only lukewarm. Such a step could temporarily strengthen Biya's political hand and ensure political stability in the short run, but in the longer run would alienate large portions of the Cameroonian population and foster regional discord. []

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In our judgment, Biya's reticent political style will make it difficult for him to recapture the initiative. Although he has proved a more savvy politician than many expected when he gained the presidency, Biya is a private person, who does not use oratory and the government controlled media to its best advantage. The US Embassy reports that his long public silence following the suppression of the coup, for example, caused unnecessary uncertainty and questioning about who was in charge and what the government's post-coup priorities were. []

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We do not believe there is widespread support in Cameroon--even in the north--for the return to power of former President Ahidjo. Some Biya supporters already have accused Ahidjo of involvement in the coup attempt and the government--for the second time this year--may try him in absentia for attempting to overthrow the government. Nevertheless, unflattering comparisons between the stability that characterized Ahidjo's rule and the political uncertainty under Biya are unavoidable. []

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In our judgment, the balance of political power has now tilted in favor of the military and we believe officers irrespective of ethnic origin are now seriously questioning whether Biya is strong enough to protect their interests and hold Cameroon's diverse groups together. If Biya fails to provide decisive leadership, we believe the military is likely to become increasingly factionalized, as soldiers fall back on ethnic and regional loyalties. In our judgment, three scenarios--in descending likelihood of occurrence--are most probable:

--Senior officers most likely of southern origin could take power, arguing that Biya has failed to take charge and promising that they would serve only as caretakers until a more stable civilian government could be formed. We believe such a military government would emphasize Cameroon's moderate, pro-Western orientation and prove fairly stable, provided it took northern interests sufficiently into account and did not embark on a vendetta against the north.

--Northern officers--perhaps with the support of northern enlisted men--could move against the government if they become convinced that the "southern dominated" government plans to use the abortive April coup as a pretext for purging them from key military and civilian positions. In our judgment, the government's alertness to such a move lessens the likelihood of it succeeding, but we believe any attempt would further weaken Biya's position and could encourage non-northern officers to move.

--Disunity and jockeying for political power among senior ranks could encourage coup plotting among junior and mid-level officers. Although we have little information on the political values or composition of these ranks, they could come to believe that senior officers are more concerned with exercising political power and protecting their perquisites than with the welfare of the troops. Policy direction under these officers would be less predictable but we believe younger, inexperienced officers could, at a minimum, resort to more populist and nationalistic rhetoric. We also believe they would prove more susceptible to outside arguments that Cameroon should abandon its traditional moderate, pro-Western foreign policies in favor of a more "nonaligned" status. ☐

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Outside Influences

Cameroon maintains diplomatic relations with Libya but has scrupulously avoided any military or economic agreements with Tripoli. Yaounde is strongly opposed to Libyan activities in West Africa in general and in neighboring Chad in particular. Nor do we have evidence that indicates significant support for Qadhafi among the generally conservative and inward looking Muslims in northern Cameroon. ☐

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A growing north-south, Muslim-Christian confrontation in

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Cameroon, however, could prove an inviting target for Libyan meddling. In our judgment, Qadhafi could seek to undermine Biya's government at relatively little cost by offering backing to what are now only small, radical fringe groups in the north. Moreover, Qadhafi has relatively easy access to these groups by way of Cameroon's borders with Chad, Nigeria, and the Central African Republic. As a consequence, Biya could increase Cameroon's military presence in the north and could become less willing to permit sanctuary to Chadian refugees for fear they may include Libyans or Libyan-trained subversives. Biya must be careful, however, to avoid creating the impression that he needs military force to maintain control of the region. []

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We expect that Franco-Cameroonian relations will be strained in the short run as a result of widespread rumors in Cameroon [] that France may have had a role in the coup attempt. In particular, we expect an upsurge in sniping by Cameroon's media over the continued presence of Ahidjo in France. Biya may seek to improve his image as a national leader by emphasizing his independence from France, asserting his nonaligned status, and rededicating his efforts to reduce France's cultural dominance in Cameroon. []

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We believe, however, that both Paris and Yaounde realize that their longterm interests would be ill served by an open rupture. Biya recognizes that as long as Cameroon is wedded to France--through extensive trade, investments, and arms sales--he must maintain correct, if not warm ties with Paris. Likewise, although earlier US Embassy reporting indicates that the Mitterrand government is not enamored with Biya, Paris almost certainly recognizes that France's economic stake in Cameroon and regional security interests would be jeopardized by prolonged uncertainty. []

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Implications for the US


Biya clearly is intent on continuing to strengthen ties with Washington and already has told our Ambassador that he would like to replace weapons destroyed during the coup attempt with American arms. Biya will look for and appreciate continued symbolic backing for his government and may press the United States for greater bilateral economic ties as a sign of more tangible support. We believe, however, that Biya recognizes Washington cannot replace Paris as Cameroon's major economic benefactor or military supplier. Paris probably would welcome a moderate increase in US concern for Cameroon but any dramatic increase in economic relations--especially if at the expense of the French--would be viewed with alarm by the Mitterrand government. []

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Ultimately, Biya realizes that his regime's survival depends on his handling of domestic matters. Biya could call on the United States to take a more active role in regional affairs, however, if it appears that trouble on Cameroon's borders threatens its domestic stability. In particular, Biya may look to the United States to

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rein in Nigeria if longstanding border disputes flare up again, to take a more active role in Chad if security deteriorates in southern Chad, or to provide additional economic assistance, particularly if Cameroon faces a large influx of Chadian refugees. 

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ANNEX

Cameroon's Armed Forces

During 22 years in power former President Ahidjo attempted to ensure strict civilian control over the 6,500-man regular Army by preventing the creation of a general staff and scattering combat-ready units throughout the country. Ahidjo also kept close watch over the 6,500-7,000-man uniformed Gendarmerie and staffed its key unit--the 2,000-man Republican Guard charged with guarding the president--largely with northerners. Biya has attempted to place his own mark on the military by creating a centralized general staff and extensively shuffling command assignments. []

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[] while plotting may have been going on for some time within the Guard, officers pushed up their timetable after learning of Biya's decision to reassign key northern officers away from the capital. The insurrection was confined to Yaounde and was put down by regular Army forces, including troops airlifted from throughout the country. []

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